

Uncovering an Indiana Treasure . . .

Johnny Appleseed



“An apple a day – keeps the doctor away.” – Old Folktale

Apples are good to eat and are healthy too, but most modern doctors will tell you that even eating an apple a day isn't total insurance against getting sick. Apples, which are the fruit from a deciduous tree, come in many different varieties and are related to the rose family. Apple trees grow quite well in Indiana and the northeastern part of the United States, but they are not a native plant. Early European settlers brought apple seeds with them when they established colonies in North America. Records indicate that some of the first trees were planted by the Massachusetts Bay Company in 1630. However, it was one man alone, John Chapman, known as “Johnny Appleseed,” who was responsible for extensive plantings of apple trees in the Midwestern United States – including the state of Indiana.

John Chapman was born in Leominster, Massachusetts, on September 26, 1774. His mother's name was Elizabeth (Simonds) Chapman, and his father's name was Nathaniel Chapman. Johnny was the second child born to Elizabeth and Nathaniel. A sister, also named Elizabeth, was born in 1770. Johnny's father was a carpenter and a farmer of modest income. Nathaniel, a Minuteman who fought at the battle of Concord, later joined the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War in 1776. It was during this time period that Johnny's mother gave birth to her third child, a son. Unfortunately, she was already sick with advanced tuberculosis. Both she and the baby died within a few weeks of the birth.

With their mother deceased and their father away, Johnny and his sister were cared for by relatives. Nathaniel returned home from the army in 1780 and married Lucy Cooley that same year. Lucy and Nathaniel settled in Longmeadow, Massachusetts, and they had ten children together. It is not known if Johnny and Elizabeth ever went to live with them. However, we do know that Johnny maintained a close relationship with his father and his new family.

In 1787, the Northwest Ordinance officially opened up the “Northwest Territory” for settlement. Johnny is believed to have been a witness to the great emigration of settlers to this newly opened territory, which probably spurred his desire to leave Massachusetts. According to family traditions, Johnny left home to begin his travels in 1792, taking his eleven-year-old half-brother Nathaniel with him.

Johnny Appleseed was not a “scatterer of seeds” as many people believe, but he actually was very methodical in the selection of his nursery sites and the planting and care of young trees. He always selected a good loamy piece of ground that he would clear by hand, chopping out the weeds and brush. He then planted the apple seeds in neat rows and waited for the young plants to emerge. To keep out straying animals, he built fences out of fallen trees and bushes. He returned at regular intervals to repair fences, tend the ground and sell his trees.

Johnny and Nathaniel traveled throughout the states of Pennsylvania, Ohio and New York for those first few years, and eventually found their way back to western Pennsylvania when their father and his large family came west in 1805. It was at this time that the younger Nathaniel decided to cease his travels with Johnny and settled near their father in Ohio.

However, Johnny continued the nomadic life, moving ahead of the pioneers who were gradually filing into the newly opened western frontier. With true Yankee enterprise, Johnny went ahead and planted his nurseries before the pioneers arrived. Always with an eye on future markets, he scouted out areas that were prime settlement places along major travel routes. By the time families were ready to settle the area, Johnny's tracts of land, with apple trees already planted, were

ready for sale. Seldom did he make a poor choice, and it is uncanny how many towns have risen on or near his nursery sites. Johnny Appleseed was no mere dreamy wanderer. Records reveal him to be a careful, organized, strategic businessman who, over a period of several decades, bought and sold many dozen tracts of land in advance of the frontier expansion. He created apple orchards in the wildernesses of Pennsylvania, Ohio, Kentucky, Illinois and Indiana, spanning an estimated area of 100,000 square miles. Some of these trees are still bearing fruit after 150 years.

Every fall, Johnny went to the cider presses where he selected the good seeds from the discarded apple pressings. He washed the seeds and carefully packed them in bags for planting the following spring. Once he grew seedlings, he sold them for about six cents a tree. But if settlers couldn't pay, he accepted a bit of food, old clothes or even a promise to pay in the future. He gave away trees to needy families only. He was not a poor man, but his assets were certainly never a fortune. He never used banks and frequently buried his money to use at a later date.

Johnny went barefoot most of the time because shoes were hard to come by and seldom fit his tough, gnarled feet. This along with his practice of wearing cast-off clothing that fit him poorly, have led to some humorous descriptions of his appearance. As a vegetarian, Johnny had no need for a gun or knife and carried only a stewpot or a kettle with him, which he kept tied to his pack. He is often described as small and wiry with hollow cheeks and a thin body because he walked so much and ate so little. His most remarkable feature appears to have been his eyes, for so many people commented that they were dark, piercingly brilliant eyes that could "read the thoughts in a man's soul."

It is not exactly known when Johnny Appleseed embraced the teachings of Emanuel Swedenborg, founder of the Church of the New Jerusalem, but it is known that Johnny considered himself a Bible missionary very early in life. In addition to planting his apple trees, he felt that it was his purpose to share his religious thoughts and the Bible with others. Besides befriending many of the settlers, he made friends with many of the Indian tribes. He frequently acted as a peacemaker between the Native Americans and the white settlers, and was sometimes able to avert trouble between a tribe and incoming pioneers.

While John Chapman's earliest wanderings took him through the states of New York and Pennsylvania, in his later years he journeyed primarily through Ohio and Indiana with some forays into Kentucky and Illinois. He had no permanent residence, but occasionally stayed in a friend's home or with some of the pioneers that he had met. He lived this lifestyle for over fifty years. While staying with friends in Fort Wayne, Indiana, he received word that some cattle had broken through a fence around one of his nurseries 20 miles away. On his return trip from repairing the fence, he was caught in a snowstorm and became stricken with "the winter plague," which was probably pneumonia. He died in the home of his friend, William Worth, on March 18, 1845, at the age of 70.

Today you can visit Johnny Appleseed's gravesite in Archer Park in Fort Wayne, which has been designated a national landmark. Every year in the fall, Fort Wayne hosts the Johnny Appleseed Festival where visitors from throughout the nation come and celebrate the pioneer spirit of John Chapman, a man who fulfilled the Biblical requirements: "To do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with his God."

Additional Resources:

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Johnny Appleseed Festival, The. Johnny Appleseed Festival Home Page, 2003. www.johnnyappleseedfest.com

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Price, Robert. *Johnny Appleseed: Man and Myth*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1954.